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To scope or not to scope? The benefits and challenges of integrating scoping studies in rapid qualitative research and evaluation

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ABSTRACT

Creating sustainable change and fostering collaborative relationships between researchers and stakeholders is a recognized challenge in the field of evaluation. Identifying programme purpose, cultural context, potential challenges, and engaging stakeholders before an evaluation can produce responsive and impactful evaluations. This paper discusses implementing a targeted scoping study within the framework of rapid qualitative research and evaluation. A scoping study enables collaborative decision-making on evaluation priorities, and functions as an evaluability assessment in time-sensitive contexts. In our experience, a scoping study can be carried out in as little as five days or as long as six weeks. It is timely to revisit the question of what factors influence evaluation outcomes, a scoping study can be used to support an evaluation, address access to data and research, and strengthen communication channels. The methodological approach was used to co-produce an evaluation with an NGO that accurately reflected their needs, recognizing possible challenges and solutions.

1. Introduction

Increasingly, policymakers and organizations recognize the importance of evidence-based evaluation to drive change within interventions and measure their impact (Sabet & Brown, 2018). These evaluations often take place in complex settings, characterized by numerous interacting components operating across several areas or domains (Petticrew, 2011). This is challenging on a number of fronts, particularly because services and interventions typically consist of multiple components delivered across diverse settings. Additionally, without explicitly stating the assumptions about how a service is intended to work, who it targets and what outcomes define success, it is impossible to successfully evaluate it. Therefore, evaluators often struggle to establish clear relationships and face low levels of staff buy-in and engagement, leading to poor results (Bayley, 2021).

Picciotto (2011) characterised evaluation as a systematic process to assess the merit and significance of a programme or intervention with the objective of fostering sustainable improvement. These require effective strategies, and the development of collaborative relationships between researchers and other stakeholders, which is a known challenge (Holmes et al., 2017). Often in crisis situations, or when there is great urgency to make decisions, these challenges are accentuated because evaluations tend to involve a lack of rigorous evidence and rely on practitioner expertise (Bowen et al., 2019; Vindrola-Padros, 2021).

It is widely accepted that before a full-blown evaluation, steps are taken to determine whether a program or intervention is feasible. There is a plethora of terminology and tools to describe approaches that share essential characteristics of collecting evidence prior to evaluation. Evaluability assessment (EA) or exploratory evaluations, first documented by (Wholey, 1979), were developed to assess the adequacy of a program's structure and resources to achieve measurable goals and determine utilization of evaluation findings. EAs function as 'diagnostic tools' that link directly to the evaluation context, for instance, to determine whether a programme is ready for a full-scale evaluation, sufficient data and identifying there no barriers to the evaluation process. Various models, frameworks and checklists have been adapted to conduct EA (Wholey, 2015; Thurston & Potvin, 2003; Smith, 2013; Levinton et al., 2010). Baratieri et al. (2019) conducted a literature review on EA and reported an increase use in the field of health, highlighting its role in ensuring that evaluations are properly scoped to yield meaningful results. However, issues remain regarding the quality and methodological rigor of EAs, such as describing the involvement of evaluators and stakeholders, appropriate description of methods for conducting EAs, and outlining data collection strategies. In addition, the

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practical application of EAs is limited in fast-paced, rapidly changing environments (Lam & Skinner, 2021; Watts & Washington, 2016). EAs may not be suitable where the findings of the evaluation are required within a short timeframe and for a specific audience (M. McNall & Foster-Fishman, 2007; M.A. McNall, Welch, Ruh, Mildner, & Soto, 2004; Vindrola-Padros, Brage, & Johnson, 2021).

Rapid evaluations have been proposed as a series of approaches to synthesize evidence in a timely manner to inform decision-making and disseminate information (Khangura et al., 2012). Rapid evaluations seek to address the complexity of a program/intervention by collecting data from various sources which extend beyond academic research and expertise. These help to identify underlying frameworks that support and enable various activities, to inform decision-making processes (Beebe, 2001; Vindrola-Padros & Vindrola-Padros, 2018). Rapid evaluation methodologies are increasingly conducted and often requested by organizations (Moore et al., 2018). However, they may sacrifice depth and rigor for speed, potentially overlooking longer-term or more complex issues. There is also limited literature on how these methods remain rigorous and what steps are likely to ensure they remain useful to organizations and policy makers (King et al., 2022). Moreover, there are challenges in navigating unrealistic expectations, inadequate ethical and collaborative practice and maintaining engagement due to time constraints.

Scoping studies, can be a useful resource to develop targeted questions, and co-produce the evaluation design with stakeholders (including deadlines for the sharing of emerging findings) and ensure findings can be shared at a time (or in areas where the study will take place) when these insights can be used to inform decision-making processes (Vindrola-Padros, 2020). Scoping studies can also help identify situations or contexts where a rapid evaluation might not be appropriate, leading to decisions to abandon the plan to carry out an evaluation or to change the design to a long-term and, perhaps, adopt a more complex evaluation to help teams solve the right problem (Vindrola-Padros, 2021). Additionally, they are useful to map the landscape of a programme to identify key concepts and gaps, the range of available evidence and are used to report resource issues, data collection challenges, expertise and time needed.

We have conducted several evaluations involving scoping studies in the field of health (Corner et al., 2022; Vindrola-Padros et al., 2019; Moniz et al., 2023). In our evaluations, scoping data influenced the evolution of the evaluation design and its application due to contact between evaluators and users, resulting in greater trust. This required early input and stakeholder involvement throughout. Data were gathered through interviews and workshops with stakeholders to understand the contextual relevance of the service or intervention. Using continuous feedback loops, scoping studies facilitated the development of frameworks that link to evaluation outcomes, enhancing its effectiveness and impact by targeting specific questions (Corner et al., 2022; Vindrola-Padros et al., 2019; Moniz et al., 2023).

Scoping studies can address issues often neglected in certain approaches such as collaborative working, cultural sensitivity and equity (Dean-Coffey, 2018, Nunns, 2009). Evaluation tools such as multicultural, feminist and empowerment evaluations reflect the shift in values to conduct inclusive evaluations, providing evidence on what works, why, for whom and under what circumstances (Dukhanin, Topazian, & DeCamp, 2018). However, there is a lack of consensus on how this should be done (Flinders et al., 2016).

Scoping studies play a role in addressing ethical challenges, such as managing conflicts of interest and being culturally sensitive (American Evaluation Association, 2018). Scoping studies provide evaluators with guidance on quality, on appropriateness of questions that tailor and shape the evaluation rather than a broad approach to evaluation (Schwandt, 2015). They incorporate knowledge from individuals directly impacted by the issue under investigation and address relevant research questions and enhance communication (Madden & Morley, 2016). However, achieving these ideals can be challenging in practice, such as time and resource constraints to properly engage relevant stakeholders and address ethical dilemmas (i.e., conflict of interest). Engaging communities at an earlier stage enables a smooth transition and buy-in, and helps identify any issues or red flags at the outset of the proposed work. Additionally, recognizing barriers to participation and being flexible in adapting traditional research methodologies needs careful planning and maintaining transparency throughout the evaluation process, such as costing interpreters, using community venues and supporting participation.

This article outlines a process for scoping studies developed by Vindrola-Padros (2021), in the field of rapid qualitative research and evaluation. We present five main phases to a scoping study. We then discuss these phases using a healthcare case study example and capture the lessons learned and how these can be generalized to other programs or disciplines, particularly to those with an interest in time sensitive contexts.

1.1. What is a scoping study?

A scoping study, which is similar to 'exploratory evaluation' or 'evaluability assessment,' can be understood as a brief stage before developing a study or evaluation (Hallingberg et al., 2018; Vindrola-Padros, 2021). In our experience, a scoping study can be carried out in as little as five days or as long as six weeks, depending on the objective and available resources. It must be noted that this does not include pre-planning and organizational input needed to facilitate a successful scoping study. There are several scoping approaches that are used in the field of evaluation. The SCOPE framework developed by The International Network of Research Management Societies (INORMS, 2021) is a five-stage process including contextual and methodological considerations with a focus on probing unintended consequences that may occur. This framework emphasizes a thorough examination of the evaluation context and methodological rigor. USAID (1996) has established comprehensive checklists and guidance for evaluation scoping, which include participatory methods with stakeholders and a focus on utilizing existing and available data. Other approaches provide comprehensive guidelines focusing on literature searching, transparent reporting and combining realist approaches (Pawson & Tilley, 2004). These various approaches offer different strengths and can be selected based on the specific context and objectives of the evaluation.

The purpose of a scoping study is to familiarize researchers with the context of the organization, their most pressing problems, and priorities, to coproduce an evaluation with stakeholders that can be relevant and responsive to those needs. A scoping study involves reviewing evidence from different sources, with both researchers and stakeholders being part of the design and implementation. This review of evidence might entail the use of existing data (i.e., documents or existing datasets) as well as the generation of new evidence (i.e., carrying out interviews or observations). The findings of the scoping study are discussed with stakeholders and through one or various scoping workshops where they reach general agreement on the research questions, the design, and the dissemination plan (Vindrola-Padros, 2021).

In our experience, incorporating a scoping study phase in a rapid study or evaluation is important for various reasons: 1) it allows "testing" of the theoretical approach used to guide the study; 2) it can help develop focused and relevant research questions; 3) it helps inform a study design that is feasible in a short timeframe; 4) it allows the identification of 'red flags' or reasons why it might not be appropriate to move forward with a rapid study, and to identify an alternative methodology; 5) it can produce emerging or preliminary findings, which can be used to inform larger evaluations; 6) it facilitates setting out clear roles and responsibilities and managing expectations of what can be achieved in a subsequent rapid evaluation; 7) it leads to the agreement of a dissemination plan to ensure findings are shared in a timely way; and 8) it promotes engagement with stakeholders generating a sense of ownership over the evaluation and findings (Hallingberg et al., 2018;

Vindrola-Padros & Johnson, 2020; Better Evaluation, 2013).

1.2. What are the phases of a scoping study?

One of the key defining characteristics of rapid qualitative research and evaluation is their iterative design (Beebe, 2001; McNall et al., 2004). The term 'iterative' refers to a repetitive, circular, constantly changing research process where 'cycles' or 'loops' are used to generate evidence, reflect on the findings, obtain feedback, and inform changes in the original study design. Such cycles allow for 'course correction' or the adaptation of the study design. The scoping study represents the first iterative process in a rapid evaluation as it is implemented to inform the evaluation design. It can be organized into five phases (Box 1):

1.2.1. Phase 1: setting out the exploratory questions

To start, the research team should set out the exploratory questions, which are organized around broad topics such as the aims, assumptions, and outcomes of the evaluation. These exploratory questions depend on discipline and individual context and can be adjusted accordingly. While these questions are not novel, the emphasis is on tailoring these questions with relevant stakeholders. Scoping studies guiding questions (Vindrola-Padros, 2021, p 39):

1. What is the main **purpose** of the evaluation? What is it trying to inform?
2. Who are the main stakeholders (considering a wide range of interested with different lived experiences)
3. What are the main **components**/factors shaping the area or situation under investigation?
4. What is the **existing evidence** in relation to this topic or area? What are the theoretical frameworks that have been used in previous studies or evaluation?
5. Are any aspects of these already being **evaluated**?
6. What does **success** look like for stakeholders? What stories are being told around what "success" means? What examples can they share for how insights and compelling storytelling is done?
7. What **metrics** are being collected and used?
8. When do key **decisions** need to be made? Who will be involved in these decisions?
9. How will the research findings be used to inform these decisions? Are there any preferences in relation to the **format** or mechanism for sharing these findings?
10. What **standards,** frameworks and other factors inform the evaluation?

1.2.2. Phase 2: planning the strategy for answering the guiding questions

Depending on the type of evaluation, its specific aims and resource availability, we recommend using various data sources to address the guiding questions (Table 1). For instance: i) rapid literature reviews, such as evidence mapping exercises (Miake-Lye et al., 2016**),** scoping reviews (Arksey and O'Malley, 2005; Levac et al., 2010; Tricco et al., 2017), and rapid systematic reviews for synthesizing existing knowledge quickly, these are often employed in evaluations requiring a broad overview of existing evidence (Tricco et al., 2017); ii) discussions with relevant stakeholders and other research teams provide insight into programme/service context and key activities, which are suitable for program implementation; iii) observations during relevant meetings or unstructured observations such as *'touring'*, *'hanging out'* or *'shadowing'* offer firsthand perspectives which are beneficial for evaluations requiring real-time observations; iv) documentary analysis of local reports, relevant policies, protocols, and minutes of meetings add depth which are commonly used in evaluations requiring detail examination of organisational and policy frameworks; v) review of theoretical frameworks from stakeholders or the wider literature establish a foundation to guide analysis and are valuable in evaluations that aim to contextualize findings; vi) site visits and tours offer direct exposure to study areas, which are essential for evaluations requiring exploration of physical environments; and vii) other activities where researchers can delve into the topic or area of study offer flexibility to meet the unique needs of the evaluation.

Box 1
Phases of a scoping study.

1	Setting out the exploratory questions
2	Planning a strategy for answering the questions
3	Carrying out data collection and analysis
4	Sharing findings with stakeholders
5	Agreeing a plan.

1.2.3. Phase 3: carrying out data collection and analysis

As mentioned above, a scoping study will rely on the use of existing evidence as well as the collection of new data through methods such as interviews and observations. Following rapid research approaches, data collection and analysis are carried out in parallel to save time. Before a scoping study begins, an identification of the key parties, and adequate time and resources must be in place. We have included an example of different timelines in Tables 2 and 3 (Vindrola-Padros, 2021, p 40). The first days/weeks are used to collect and analyze data as well as to plan the scoping workshop that will be carried out at the end of the scoping study.

1.2.4. Phase 4: sharing the scoping study findings

The main purpose of the scoping study is to reach an agreement in relation to the scope of the evaluation, the overall design, and the dissemination plan. This agreement is reached in the scoping workshop by the relevant parties who were identified during the data collection and analysis phase (Phase 3). The final decision on who to include in the scoping workshop will vary by context, but in general we tend to include stakeholders with the following characteristics:

1. A senior member of the organization or program/service design/implementation
2. People in charge of the day-to-day running of the program/service
3. People who receive the service or use the program
4. People who might be involved in national decision-making or national policy
5. People who might have been against or might be skeptical about the benefits of the program/service
6. External organizations or actors doing similar work or planning to do similar work in different contexts
7. Integrate opinions of diversity/ equity facilitators to the project design decisions, ensuring that the studies do not disadvantage anyone, particularly individuals or groups who are underserved.

The scoping workshop normally begins with the sharing of the findings generated in the previous days/weeks of the scoping study. These can include: 1) The draft program theory or model guiding the design of an intervention or program; 2) Areas or issues that stakeholders agree should be studied and areas of disagreement; 3) The main problems identified by key people and possible areas for improvement; 4) Differences in perceptions/experiences among potential participant groups; 5) Available data sources and possible problems in accessing data in the rapid qualitative study or evaluation; 6) Areas or issues that may already be assessed or studied by other teams; 7) Theoretical frameworks that can be used to guide or frame the evaluation; 8) Preferences for dissemination, including a draft dissemination plan with a

Table 1
Examples of data sources used in scoping studies.

Description
Informal meetings or phone conversations with key stakeholders (5 –7 people or more depending on the perspectives/viewpoints to be included)
Observations during relevant meetings and/or a tour of the area where the study is to be conducted
Review of relevant documents (locally produced)
Review of existing datasets
Informal discussions with research teams working on similar topics/areas
A quick review of theoretical frameworks previously used in studies on the same topic/area
A review of the published evidence on the topic/context

timeline.

Decisions about the evaluation design and dissemination plan can be made in multiple ways, but we often rely on the use of participatory techniques like the ones outlined in Table 4 to generate discussions and reach consensus as a group.

We also suggest considering the use of groupwork strategies throughout this phase (Table 5).

1.2.5. *Phase 5: agree on a plan*

As mentioned above, the aim of the scoping workshop is to agree on a plan for moving forward. This plan normally includes the research questions that will be used to guide the evaluation. The study design, the outputs that will be generated by the timepoints when findings are needed. A dissemination plan like the one included in Table 6 can also be developed and used to guide the integration of feedback loops to share emerging findings with stakeholders.

1.3. *When a scoping study marks the end of a rapid study*

In most cases, a scoping study is only the beginning of an evaluation as it is used to inform its design. However, in some cases, a scoping study can highlight factors that would not be conducive to the generation of high-quality findings in a short amount of time. In these cases, the scoping study can be used to make a decision to abandon the plans to proceed with an evaluation. In the past, we have decided to stop a project at the scoping study stage due to the following reasons:

- Implementation is not likely to occur within the evaluation timeframe
- The data required for the evaluation will not be available
- A rapid study design is not appropriate
- The research team will not be able to access the required people
- Stakeholders are not properly engaged
- The evaluation could produce negative or unintended consequences
- Another evaluation is already being carried out (duplicating efforts).

The decision to avoid proceeding with an evaluation does not mean

Table 2
Example of a six-week scoping phase timeline.

	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6
Meeting observations						
Informal conversations						
Documentary review						
Data analysis						
Scoping workshop						

Table 3
Example of a five-day scoping phase timeline.

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Meeting observations					
Informal conversations					
Documentary review					
Data analysis					
Scoping workshop					

Table 4
Participatory techniques for prioritizing findings from the scoping study phase.

Activity	Purpose	Description	Broad overview of steps
Ranking exercise	Facilitating the identification of research priorities	Prioritization exercise, where the group identifies and discusses potential areas to include in the study protocol design	• Participants are presented with a list of potential areas that could be included in the study. • Attendees discuss the number of areas ranked highest and agree on which areas should be prioritized.
Important/urgent exercise	Discuss how, when, and how much time and effort to devote to the inclusion of areas	Prioritization exercise, where the group prioritizes the areas to be included in the design of the study and the resources to be invested	• The research team develops cards with the key areas that could be included in the study, or these areas are identified in the workshop by the participants themselves. • The research team then agrees with the participants on how these urgent/essential categories will be integrated into the study
How we would use these findings	Prioritize the research that will generate the needed findings	Reflection and prioritization exercise, where the group describes the insights they expect to find according to the area identified and discusses how they will use them.	• The research team presents the key areas that could be included in the study, or these areas are identified in the workshop by the participants themselves. • The team will then facilitate an open discussion concerning these to see if the attendees agree that these areas should be included in the study.

Source: Rapid Research Evaluation and Appraisal Lab (RREAL), 2020.

that the scoping study did not generate useful information. In the past, we have shared the findings from rapid evidence reviews carried out during the scoping stage to inform aspects of implementation. In cases where the scoping study has pointed to implementation delays, we have used the scoping study findings to identify the factors acting as barriers in implementation with the service or intervention so these could be addressed. When the data required for a rapid evaluation is not available or we have cases of missing data, the scoping study findings have been used to inform the development of new datasets so a future evaluation can be carried out.

1.4. *Case study: evaluation of a community engagement model with users with learning disabilities*

In 2020, our team was asked to carry out a mixed-methods formative evaluation of a model developed by a local NGO. The project involved service users with learning disabilities. We carried out a preliminary meeting with staff who were central to the evaluation to understand the organizational, geographical and socio-political context and who would be actively involved in the evaluation, this enabled ethical and culturally responsive practices. The NGO was not clear on the scope of the evaluation and how they could use the evaluation findings to make changes in real-time. Therefore, the team proposed to carry out a rapid literature review of similar approaches as well as a scoping study during the early stages of the team's engagement with the NGO. The aim of the scoping study was to clarify the scope and agree on the research questions that would guide the evaluation.

The scoping study aimed to:

1. Define the objectives and areas that would be covered in the evaluation.
2. Refine the research questions guiding the evaluation.
3. Agree on an evaluation timeline.
4. Agree on a dissemination plan.

Table 5
Group work strategies.

General considerations	• Establish ground rules/team code • How the physical/online room is set up makes a difference • Build in time for reflection • People learn by talking • What will happen that will make the best use of everyone's time? How will brainstorming be facilitated? • How/Who is going to do the workshop record-keeping? Consider concise and action-oriented writing
During the workshop	• Open with questions like: Why are we here? • Maintain engagement with the use of energizers and breaks • Co-integrating perspectives of other group members depends on establishing connections, hence, use icebreakers
Closure considerations	• Small group discussions need to be integrated with the wider group. • Group review of what is learnt/gained out of the scoping exercise. • Finish scoping exercise with action planning.

Source:Adapted from Chambers et al. (2018); Friedman and Marquez (2015) & KSL Training (n.d.).

1.5. *Methodology*

The scoping study employed a mixed-methods approach, including qualitative data collection through interviews and workshops with stakeholders and individuals directly impacted by the service. For the design and implementation of the scoping study, the five stages described as essential in Box 1 were followed: 1) Setting out the exploratory questions; 2) Planning the strategy for answering the questions; 3) Carrying out data collection and analysis; 4) Sharing the scoping study findings, and 5) Agree on a plan.

1.5.1. *Phase 1: setting out the exploratory questions*

The following questions were used to guide the scoping study followed by a series of supplementary questions based on the answers provided:

– What is the theory of change underpinning the program? What are the expected outcomes?
– Who are the main stakeholders of the program?
– What are the main components of the program? Which components need to be included in the evaluation?
– What are the main costs incurred in the delivery of the program?
– How is the impact of the programme currently being measured?
– What standards, frameworks and other factors informed the evaluation?

Table 6
Example of a dissemination plan, including the sharing of findings after the scoping study.

Study stage	Time into study	Type of dissemination	Purpose	Format	Type of stakeholders
Scoping/ familiarization	Week 1	Sharing research questions and study outline	Agreement on the purpose of the study	Face to face/ online meeting	Intervention designers, implementers, and users
Scoping/ familiarization	Week 2 or 3	Sharing final study scope	Final agreement on study design and dissemination plan	Email or face to face/ online meeting	Intervention designers, implementers, and users
Fieldwork and analysis	Month 2	Short memos (monthly or weekly)	Highlight emerging findings	Email	Implementers
Fieldwork and analysis	Month 3−4	Short memos (monthly or weekly)	Highlight emerging findings	Face to face/ online meeting	Intervention designers, implementers, and users
Final analysis	Month 5	Report draft	Cross-check early interpretations	Email or face to face/ online meeting	Implementers
Writing	Month 6	Final report and presentation	Final sharing of findings and development of recommendations	Face to face/ online meeting	Intervention designers, implementers, and users

1.5.2. Phase 2: planning the strategy for answering the questions

We designed a strategy to answer the questions that included: 1) Informal discussions with key stakeholders to gather information on the context, current status of the approach, and key activities; 2) Non-participant observation during relevant meetings; 3) Review of relevant documents such as local reports, policies and meeting minutes and 4) Workshop with key stakeholders to prioritize areas for assessment (Phase 4).

1.5.3. Phase 3: carrying out data collection and analysis

We carried out informal discussions with six stakeholders, including NGO staff in senior roles, frontline staff and parent representatives. The interviews included questions on their perceptions of the program, the expected outcomes, any challenges they anticipated in its implementation and key areas that should be included in the evaluation (see Appendix 1 for the interview topic guide). We carried out observations during strategy meetings as well as early implementation meetings to understand how the program was being presented and identify any factors that could act as initial barriers in implementation. We reviewed the documents that the NGO had produced on the program to date to identify how the program was presented and any changes that might have occurred in its design over time. We then worked iteratively to collate the data and identify themes based on the criteria used to enhance the quality of the frameworks adopted. We also drew insights from similar approaches used in other locations.

1.5.4. Phase 4: sharing the scoping study findings in a scoping workshop

The plans for the scoping workshop were coproduced with the program lead and the workshop attendees included: the director of the NGO, the lead of the program two members of staff in charge of delivering the program, two service users (parents who had children with learning disabilities), a member of staff from the local government responsible for delivering public services to children with learning disabilities and a general practitioner (GP) with experience in the area. This ensured that voices from a wide range of stakeholders were included, seeking their advice about the evaluation agenda and fostering equal partnerships between stakeholders and service users. During the scoping workshop, we used these findings to facilitate a discussion on a draft program theory (outlining the aims of the program, activities, expected outcomes and mechanisms for change in simple language and visuals), the areas to include in the evaluation and a proposal for how to evaluate these, examples of data required for the evaluation and a list of questions different stakeholders' thought should be included in the interview topic guides (see Table 7).

The research team explained the findings and asked for feedback if anything was missing or if anything that did not belong should be removed or placed elsewhere. The outputs were discussed in relation to a draft timeline, where the team obtained information on when the findings should be shared to inform key decisions about the implementation of the program, its scale-up and sustainability. The research team also discussed the potential outputs that could be generated from the evaluation, which included: 1) Quarterly presentations with interim findings (with visual materials); 2) A final report (with infographics that could be used independently); 3) An animated video presenting the evaluation and findings, and 4) The publication of a manuscript with evaluation findings in an academic journal.

1.5.5. Phase 5: agree on a plan

The discussions during the scoping workshop (phase 4) were used by the research team to develop a final plan for the evaluation tailored to the NGO, which included: a draft study protocol based on the agreed scope for the evaluation, a timeline identifying the key timepoints when preliminary findings and a final report would be shared, and the types of final outputs that would need to be submitted to the group as well as the budget of the evaluation. These documents were reviewed and agreed by the scoping workshop attendees, which stakeholders agreed was appropriate and offered a holistic assessment.

1.6. Reflections and positionality

Reflecting on our experience, the success of the scoping study relied heavily on community and stakeholder buy-in and ensuring that those with lived experiences were not missed out. Engaging with communities required a thorough understanding of their issues and how this would impact participation, which was limited by team and resources available. Further to this, the sampling framework was co-designed with NGO staff, but might have missed relevant stakeholders.

It is also important to discuss the evaluation teams' positionality. Our team were inter-sectionally diverse, including researchers with lived experience related to the study topic. This diversity allowed us to unpick the data and question one another's interpretation. The team were also

Table 7
Questions suggested by stakeholders during the scoping study.

Area to be assessed	Question
Components of the approach	– How do other similar approaches to community engagement work? – What are alternative approaches the NGO could consider? – Does the NGO want to work with younger populations?
Impact of the approach	– What are the key differences of this model to facilitate community engagement work? – What do people think of involving families in community engagement work? – What impact does it have on local people and use of resources within the community? – What impact does it have on families disproportionality affected by…?
Sustainability/scale-up	– How can the NGO facilitate sustainability of the services and informal family networks? – Should the NGO expand the use of this model to other areas as a way of working?

established and experienced in conducting rapid research, which involved working closely and regular support from the lead investigator. We emphasize team working and support as this has the potential to offer benefits to efficiently collate data sources, coordination and reflexive thinking, which were essential for navigating the complexities of the scoping study (Machin et al., 2023).

1.7. Challenges of carrying out a scoping study

The integration of a scoping study in an already compressed timeline might generate challenges that need to be taken into consideration during the early stages of an evaluation These challenges include: 1) Adding time and work to study schedules that may already be short; 2) Failing to involve all relevant stakeholders adequately; and 3) Providing a limited or even distorted view of the context/issue, thus negatively impacting the study design. Scoping studies may claim a degree of certainty which may not be warranted and may stretch findings beyond the context.

In order to avoid potential delays created by a scoping study, researchers might want to consider carrying out other set-up activities in parallel to the scoping study to reduce the amount of time required for these after the scoping study has ended. Furthermore, even though the scoping study adds time and resources to a rapid study, in our experience, the benefits (in the form of early collaborator engagement, co-design and identifying potential problems at an early stage) outweigh the delays.

Different engagement strategies can be implemented depending on the type/group of stakeholder and these can be changed on a continuous basis to respond to their needs. However, it is important to acknowledge and address a notable limitation associated with this approach, Pratt (2019) highlights that although these exercises are aimed at democratizing the decision-making processes, the prevalence of power imbalances in such exercises can inadvertently be perpetuated. There may be organizational and financial resources which can grant certain stakeholders a more influential position. It is also important to manage the expectations of stakeholders in relation to what a scoping study can achieve and to present it as an exploratory exercise and not a formal evaluation. To further mitigate the distortion of a context or issue, a continuous process should be maintained with stakeholders throughout the study and interpretations and assumptions should be corrected based on their feedback.

2. Discussion and conclusion

The need for better evidence-based evaluations is recognised as critical to ensuring evaluations are relevant. While there are some areas where evaluations are done well, these are often limited in scope and applicability (Thurston & Potvin, 2003). Developing a better understanding of factors impacting an evaluation is vital to reduce current gaps as part of a complex system and better inform how evaluations ought to be designed. This involves working collaboratively to facilitate decision-making and transfer of knowledge and insights between stakeholders and allow more rapid feedback and dissemination (Best & Holmes, 2010). It is timely to revisit the question of what factors influence evaluation. Over the past decade, funders, governments and academics continue to invent and adapt evaluation approaches to use across disciplines. As stated from the outset, scoping studies are an iterative process comprising of a number of phases. Our approach shares similar processes associated with EAs and exploratory studies (Wholey, 2015, Thurston & Potvin, 2003, Smith, 2013) which includes collaboration with stakeholders and gathering insights prior to a full-scale evaluation. However, a scoping study can be conducted in a short space of time, focusing on contact and collaboration. Alongside this, a scoping study is helpful to address the expertise needed and researcher characteristics. Due to resources, we were unable to conduct an in-depth review and offer a descriptive synthesis of using a scoping study, ideally enabling more focused synthesis in the future.

The integration of a scoping study at the early stage of an evaluation offers a valuable methodological approach for evaluators and organizations who are keen to involve stakeholders as active partners. Scoping studies can be used to ensure the evaluation is focused enough to deliver high-quality findings in a short timeframe and can function as a rapid evaluability assessment. Scoping studies address important criteria for facilitating findings which can be transferred into action (i.e., justification, inclusion, and dissemination). Furthermore, scoping studies can benefit organizations/programmes through prioritization of objectives, setting realistic time scales and offering research teams an understanding of the context before the evaluation begins. Scoping studies have been tested with a wide range of rapid study designs, but questions on their effectiveness, the ability of teams to maintain stakeholders' engagement, and the extent to which the scoping study findings represent a full picture of the context and main issues still remain. Further research into the experiences of stakeholders and research teams involved in scoping studies can help improve the methods and approaches we use.

Evaluation approaches require careful planning and coordination, there has already been a significant number of approaches recognizing the work required to embed exploratory and EA approaches sustainably. Scoping studies offer a practical framework for those wishing to ensure new evaluations are evidence-based, time-sensitive and complementary to existing structures and initiatives. However, these approaches work best when supported and require careful coordination.

2.1. Lessons learnt

- Scoping studies can help facilitate the co-production of evaluations, establishing early engagement and agreement regarding the scope and evaluation timeline.
- Scoping studies are a valuable tool to help make time- sensitive decisions for informing the design of an evaluation.
- Scoping studies can also be used as an evaluability assessment, identifying situations when a rapid evaluation design might not be feasible.
- Scoping studies are developed by working collaboratively and through stakeholder buy-in to allow more rapid feedback and dissemination.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Syka Iqbal: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Macarena Chepo:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Marc Hebert:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Cecilia Vindrola-Padros:** Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Methodology, Conceptualization.

Appendix 1. Scoping study questions

1. What is the programme theory underpinning the model? What are the proposed benefits of change? What are the expected outcomes?
2. Who are the main stakeholders of the programme?
3. What are the main components of the model? Which components need to be included in the evaluation?

4. What are the main costs incurred in the delivery of the model?
5. How do other similar models of co-production work?
6. What difference does co-production make?
7. What do people think of the model?
8. What impact does it have on local people, use of resources?
9. How is the impact of the model being measured?
10. How is sustainability maintained?
11. Are any aspects of the model already being evaluated?
12. How would you use the evaluation findings?

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